




DHEC's Office of Solid Waste Reduction and Recycling

For Your Information...

Buying Recycled... and Beyond

What is buying recycled? Buying recycled is buying products made from recycled materials. Products made from recycled materials are called recycled-content products.

Recycling is a three-step process. That's why the recycling symbol  has three arrows that complete a loop. The first step is collection – that's when you put your recyclables such as aluminum cans, plastic bottles, glass bottles and newspapers into your curbside recycling bin or into the bins at the drop-off center. The second step is manufacturing – that's when the recyclables are processed into raw materials to make new products. The third step is buying recycled – that's when you complete the recycling loop.

Everything you buy affects the environment, but some choices are better than others.

Are recycled-content products inferior? There are inferior and superior products no matter what you buy. Recycled-content products are no exception. Despite what some critics say,

the quality and performance of recycled-content products are not automatically inferior to their non-recycled counterparts. It's almost an urban legend that recycled-content copy paper doesn't work as well as non-recycled paper in printers and copiers. Recycled-content products are manufactured to the same performance standards as virgin products.

How can I tell if a product is a recycled-content product?

When shopping, look for the chasing arrows on the products you buy and read the label. That's the best way to identify recycled-content products. There are a few terms that you need to know. See the "FYI: Environmentally Preferable Purchasing" fact sheet for more information.

Why buy recycled?

Buying recycled-content products creates demand for recycled materials and sustains local recycling programs. Without a demand for recycled-content products, there would be no reason to collect recyclables. If no one buys recycled, recycling will not work. Buying recycled has many other environmental and economic benefits. See "Five Good Reasons to Buy Recycled" on the back of this fact sheet.

Buying recycled is just one part of an overall strategy of shopping with the environment in mind – also known as enviroshopping, environmentally preferable purchasing (also called EPP) and green purchasing. Green purchasing means buying smart. You can conserve natural resources, save energy and prevent waste by buying products that are energy efficient, are made with recycled-content materials, are recyclable, have no or reduced packaging and are reusable.

Are recycled-content products hard to find?

No. All of the materials that you recycle such as aluminum, paper, plastic, glass and cardboard are made into thousands of recycled-content products. You may be buying recycled and not know it. You go to the grocery store, right? Most cereal boxes, aluminum and steel cans as well as glass bottles have recycled content. Many products you use at home including paper towels, garden hoses, compost bins, detergent bottles, plastic lumber, paint, carpeting, insulation, clothing and shoes can be made from recycled materials. Many office and school supplies such as notebooks, notebook paper, copy paper, legal pads, pens and pencils also can be made from recycled materials.

Do recycled-content products cost more? Many of these products are priced competitively with their non-recycled counterparts. Some recycled-content products do cost more, but often an increase in demand for those products will allow manufacturers to lower their cost.

Post-consumer material is material that comes from products used by consumers and collected for recycling. Pre-consumer material is material that is not used by consumers but rather collected as a waste material during manufacturing such as paper trimmings at a paper mill. Choosing products with a higher content of post-consumer material helps sustain local recycling programs. It's important to know that most products are not made completely from recycled material. For example, copy paper may have a total recycled content of 50 percent, comprised of 30 percent post-consumer material and 20 percent pre-consumer material. The remaining 50 percent is made from virgin materials.

What is the difference between recycled and recyclable? A recycled product is one made from recycled material. A recyclable product is one that can be collected for recycling. Remember, buying a recyclable product only has meaning if that product can be recycled in your community.

Let's go shopping.

Here are some tips to keep in mind when shopping.

- **Buy only what you need. Use what you buy.**
- **Buy products made from recycled materials.**
- **Bring your own reusable shopping bags.** This is the best way to avoid the paper vs. plastic dilemma. Durable canvas bags are light-weight and convenient and can be used thousands of times. Reusable bags can easily become a habit and save an astonishing amount of paper and plastic over time. When you are shopping at the mall, combine bags instead of getting a new bag for every item purchased.

- **Buy less packaging.** You don't want to buy garbage, right? Well, depending on what products you buy, that may be what you are doing. Don't buy stuff that is over packaged. Packaging waste, for example, makes up more than 30 percent of the nation's waste stream – and you pay for it. Compare the size of the package to the size of the product. If the package is designed to take up as much shelf space as possible, choose a competing product. Do without products that are packaged inside more than one layer. Multi-pack juice boxes for children, made with layers of cardboard, plastic, aluminum and a plastic straw attached, are a particularly wasteful example. Avoid "single-serve" packages. Buy fruit and vegetables loose. Choose products that are not in plastic trays and that do not have attached promotional materials.
- **Buy in bulk and/or concentrates.** These practices reduce packaging, save you money and reduce trips to the store. Buy large single containers instead of the same volume in many smaller containers (e.g., two-liter bottles vs. six packs). For any item with a long or unlimited shelf life (e.g., laundry detergent) or non-perishable foods you use regularly (e.g., cereals and grains), buy the biggest container you can. Put manageable amounts in reusable, smaller containers for everyday use. Don't be fooled – some bulk packages are just individually wrapped items that are packaged yet again.
- **Buy recycled paper packaging.** Pass up polystyrene (Styrofoam) egg cartons. Choose paper cartons made from recycled newsprint. For paperboard boxes (such as cereal and cracker boxes), the rule of thumb is: if the inside is gray, it's made from recycled material. Most paperboard boxes have the "100% Recycled Paperboard" logo on them.
- **Look at the container or packaging and think 'recycling.'** Choose the container that can be recycled in your community. For example, if glass is not accepted for recycling in your community, avoid products packaged in glass containers. Avoid products that are difficult to recycle (e.g., many "squeezeable" plastics which are made of numerous layers of different plastics) and instead purchase the type of container that can be recycled locally.
- **Avoid throwaway products.** Avoid single or limited-use items such as throwaway cleansing pads, non-refillable pens, plastic razors and foil baking pans. Reduce or eliminate your use of disposable plastic diapers – which account for 2 percent of the total U.S. landfill volume.

What's the bottom line? Think carefully about your purchases and their impact on the environment.

Want to learn more?

For more information on buying recycled and other solid waste issues, please call the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control's Office of Solid Waste Reduction and Recycling at **1-800-768-7348** or visit www.scdhec.gov/recycle.

For more information on buying recycled and related topics, visit the following Web sites.

- www.epa.gov/garbage/buyrec.htm
- www.greenseal.org
- www.environmentaldefense.org/article.cfm?contentid=552

Five Good Reasons to Buy Recycled

- **Buying recycled completes the recycling loop and makes recycling work.**
- **Buying recycled reduces the amount of waste disposed of in landfills.** The recycled materials are made into new products saving landfill space and reducing the need to build landfills.
- **Buying recycled conserves natural resources.** Making new products out of recycled materials instead of raw materials helps build a sustainable future.
- **Buying recycled reduces or eliminates pollution by reducing the need to extract, move and process raw materials.** In most cases, making products from recycled materials creates less air pollution, water pollution and waste than making products from raw materials.
- **Buying recycled saves energy.** Products usually take less energy to make from recycled materials than raw materials. For example, it takes 95 percent less energy to make aluminum from recycled aluminum than raw materials.



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